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Biz of Acq: Of Tossing Books, There Is No End

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Of Tossing Books, There is No End

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As space on shelves and departments becomes more and more precious, we often find ourselves needing to create much needed room for new materials and to remove those materials no longer of value to our patrons. This process of weeding a collection seems, at first glance, like a simple process. However weeding a collection in an judicious manner requires no small amount of planning and forethought. Alice Pidgeon of Pace is known to all of us in law libraries as an insightful and competent professional. She has collected copies of weeding policies from all types of law libraries to serve as a resource to those of us wishing to develop policies of our own. I could not think of anyone more suited to address this topic and am certain Alice would be willing to make copies of the policies available to anyone who requests them. — JM

On Writing a Deselection Policy; or, How to Toss Books Without Public Condemnation

by **Alice Pidgeon**
(Coordinator of Technical Services,
Pace University
School of Law Library)

To weed: To remove or get rid of as unsuitable or unwanted. It's a simple idea, but it can have pitfalls and perils for the inexperienced.

I'm sure we've all found a shelflist card or an OPAC entry for something that is no longer on the shelf. Was it stolen, misplaced or, possibly, discarded by a well-meaning individual? A written deselection or weeding policy can avoid these problems and many others.

One of the many factors that led us at Pace Law to write a weeding policy was space. Some areas are severely limited in the number of new volumes we can shelve. We frequently need to shift areas to make room for new acquisitions. Discussions led to the formation of a "Space committee" made up of the Technical Services Librarian, the Collection Maintenance Supervisor, and other staff members who had definite opinions on the topic. With

their help, I targeted some "easy to discard" materials that did not require too much thought. Put down on paper, this was the beginning of a written policy, though far from a systematic or comprehensive one.

Next, I did some reading on the topic. The most helpful I've come across is a pamphlet — **Guide to Review of Library Collections: Preservation, Storage, and Withdrawal** edited by Lenore Clark and published by the American Library Association in 1991. One of the most cogent points I discovered in this concise and useful book is to consider the ease of use of the collection: in our case we are using high and low shelving, and overfull shelves, which cause patrons to throw books on any convenient surface. In addition, as in other law libraries, the currency and accuracy of information is of paramount importance. Patrons may inadvertently use older editions and filing staff may file new pages in an old looseleaf. As the **Guide** suggests: "Additional values to be gained through deselection are increased convenience for the library user, a higher proportion of materials on the shelves that interest patrons, and economy and efficiency in the use of time by library staff." (p. 14-15). It is important to pinpoint concerns such as these and incorporate them in your justification for deselection.

Having a policy in writing deflects some of the criticism that may arise about these decisions. It also provides some institutional memory on what may have been done in the past and provides guidelines that ensure consistency from year to year.

In looking over policies from other institutions (I have volunteered to collect policies on deselection from other law libraries.), I discovered wide variations on how they were written and in the level of detail. A written policy may be a part of an institution's collection development policy or a separate document. They vary from one or two sentences on weeding to explicit instructions on procedures to be followed and the retention policies of specific titles. Needless to say, much depends on the individual library's goals and situation. My feeling is that you have to start somewhere so a mutually agreed on gen-

eral statement may work for a while. But consider

your statement a working document and solicit input from your colleagues, and possibly your patrons or interested individuals. Other staff may send memos on problem areas or ideas for inclusion in the policy. Encourage this participation by presenting the status of the policy at general staff meetings. If you have a committee working on the policy, include the staff member responsible for the actual shelving of new materials and for the collection's physical condition. In our library, this person keeps me on my toes as far as alerting me to areas with problems.

Other staff are also intimately involved with weeding policy decisions: the director (who may have to defend decisions to trustees, faculty or administration); reference librarians (who know what patrons need and don't need); the documents librarian (who may have to coordinate decisions on government publications); the microforms staff (who may have to cope with the decision to replace materials with microform); the acquisitions librarian (whose knowledge of new accessions may affect deaccessioning); and the cataloger (who must supervise the actual deaccessioning). In other words, just about everyone.

The actual criteria for weeding collections varies in terminology but generally includes: redundancy, obsolescence, physical condition, multiple copies, research value, adequate coverage of the field, availability of similar materials, interest in superseded or revised texts, usage, usefulness to the needs of the curriculum, interest in retrospective holdings or special editions, and cooperative collection agreements with other institutions. These criteria should relate closely to the collection development policy. "The same assumptions, principles, and goals that inform selection decisions and materials allocation govern the collection review program." (**Guide**, p. 2) Some policies suggest retaining last copies, out of print titles and those listed in standard bibliographies. In addition, the **Guide** suggests "that an

item should be deselected rather than stored: (a) If allowing the item to remain in the collection would produce a "negative value." (b) If the item can be obtained elsewhere at similar or lower cost than the cost of maintaining it in the collection. (c) If financial and physical resources are not available to provide continuous housing and maintenance of the item." (p. 16)

The policy should, I believe, state who will do the actual weeding. In a small library, or in the case of very occasional decisions needing to be made, the director may be the appropriate person. In my own experience, continual shelf reading by all staff works best. They bring items they believe to be weeding candidates to a shelf in Tech Services where they are reviewed by appropriate professional staff. "... The long-term process of collection review involves systematic reading of shelves by subject specialists or librarians most knowledgeable about the subject." (Guide, p. 4). In cases like this it is imperative that all staff know that there is a written policy and use it. A written policy is valuable too, if as some libraries may do, an outside consultant is hired for a weeding project. If questions do arise, there is a formal document which provides a framework for refinements and additions.

The statement should also give guidelines on when weeding should take place. If never performed on a regular basis, a special project may have to be undertaken, followed by regular maintenance. Certainly a large scale weeding (and possibly shifting) project would be disruptive to patrons and some library operations and should be scheduled carefully. If inventory is regularly performed, some attention can be paid to multiple copies and obvious duplicates if it does not slow down the process too much. In our library we have regular shelf reading assignments (changed on a yearly basis), and after reading the same area two or three times, problems such as old editions and books in poor condition become apparent. An important resource is the reference librarian or subject specialist, who, on delving into a subject finds the odd problem or two. They should be encouraged to look at the collection policy for that area and revitalize it with judicious weeding and updated acquisitions. Faculty, too, should be brought into major weeding projects in their subject areas.

A vital part of the policy is to establish detailed procedures so that the unfortunate problem I referred to at the beginning does not happen. The Guide recommends "Direct examination of the material by a

librarian, a consultant, or another person familiar with the literature of the subject [and] checking appropriate lists, catalogs and bibliographies." (p. 17). Once the decision is made, the cataloging staff needs to be informed and to begin changing the library's records. Canceling holdings on the national bibliographic utility keeps everyone informed for ILL and union listing purposes. The shelflist and OPAC need to be updated and a proper count for statistics purposes made. The acquisitions staff need to be advised for titles that have updates or subscriptions that should be canceled with the vendor. It is advisable to mark books with a "discard" or "withdrawn" stamp, so that it is clear that they are no longer part of the collection.

One of the thorniest problems that needs to be addressed at this point in the process is what to do with the discards. Much depends of course on what they are. There may also be legal restrictions on disposal. The policy should offer alternatives: remote storage; used book dealers (for large sets in good condition); periodical vendors; in-house book sales (for titles that may appeal to the public or to regular patrons); offerings to other libraries; and the dreaded garbage. Throwing out old books does not appeal to many librarians or their book-loving clientele. At Pace Law, we exhaust all other venues and then

try to recycle what we can. The biggest factors in these alternatives are time and space. Until all the alternatives are tried, considerable time may be consumed and you end up storing a quantity of marginal material in limited storage space.

Discarding books is a surprisingly difficult process for librarians trained to preserve books and to respect history and research. A written policy institutionalizes and formalizes the process. Policies from other libraries can be helpful in boosting morale and in taking heart that others have dealt with the process. Administrators and trustees need to see that librarians have an organized approach to library collections and justification for difficult decisions. In addition, many institutions must account to accrediting agencies and follow established standards by bodies such as the ABA and GPO.

How do you go about writing a policy for deselection? First, see what policy memos may already exist in your library on weeding or on retention policies. Study policies (both on collection development and on weeding) from other libraries. Begin with a tentative document and get as many people as possible to read it. Solicit advice from experienced librarians and from those with responsibility to write specialized policies. Other Tech Services

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Book Pricing Update

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Performing Arts. Within the Performing Arts, though, there was yet another discrepancy: Theater, Cinema and Dance all saw prices rise more than 20%. Only Music showed a 0% price gain since 1990, but not because prices stayed flat for the intervening years — they dropped, they rose, and they ended nearly where they began.

The chart of price fluctuations is a particularly interesting one. Architecture started as the highest priced category, and

has remained there. The Fine and Performing Arts, on the other hand, started off with quite similar list prices, and then diverged sharply, with Fine Arts titles going up by \$10 over five years, and Performing Arts titles going up by less than \$3. Again, this reflected the steadying effect of prices in Music, and the fact that Music titles account for more than half of all titles in the Performing Arts.

Even more encouraging: prices in each of the "big" categories, and in all three combined, dropped between 1993 and 1994, allowing librarians to stretch their Arts dollars a little farther. ☺

Biz of Acq

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librarians will be happy to share their experiences and ideas for discarding. And again, bring it up for discussion at general staff meetings.

Deselection has far-ranging implications: on the institution's statistics, on scholarship, on the community served by

the library and on staff morale. The benefits gained by removing titles from the library (space, currency, ease of use) must be balanced by the uniqueness of individual titles and the effect on the long-range goals of the institution. Having a concrete basis for controversial decisions can deflect criticisms by taxpayers, faculty or administrators. How else to justify a smaller (in terms of statistics) but more dynamic and useful collection? ☺

On the Road

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ticket changes so I thought it was worth an attempt. It did work! I was able to get aboard that flight. While waiting for the delayed 9:00 a.m. flight from Helsinki, I talked to the soccer players and engineers from NASA, Goddard who were also ordered to return to our country.

Finally we boarded the flight and upon takeoff, there was tremendous applause and relief from everybody on the plane. We were headed for Frankfurt then and I would connect to New York and the NASA people were headed for Washington, D.C.

I finally arrived in New York later Tuesday afternoon, and called my family from Kennedy Airport. They were concerned because they hadn't heard from me, and asked where I was. I told them that I was back in New York. Needless to say, they were elated to hear the good news.

I hope to return to Moscow again during a less stressful time. However, this experience I will never forget. ☺

Book Review: Final Edit

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himself. In the course of trying to solve the murder while running his publishing business, he paints a vivid and informative picture of how many publishers in the world of New York City publishing function, live, love and deal with everyday publishing problems, not only on the publishing premises, but sometimes at the club and in the bedroom.

While **Final Edit** does an admirable job as a top-notch murder mystery for all lovers of this genre, it is loaded with enough factual and informative publishing insights that it might well be a primer on book publishing as practiced in New York, even down to the clubs favored by the publishing community and the types of drinks imbibed. It offers much about behind-the-scenes publisher activity, auctions, wheeling and dealing with agents, manuscript preparation and submission, working the ABA floor during a convention, and publisher financing problems.

If you love book publishing, or even have a modest interest in the subject, you'll find **Final Edit** loaded with an abundance of publisher know-how and wisdom about life on the Big Apple publishing scene. Don't miss it! ☺

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